



Kathryn Brown Ramsperger

The Heron

I am full of signs, symbols, and stories.

Like my grandmother, I have lucid dreams. Like my mama, I talk to trees. Mama saw dead people too. I thought this was normal. Them being Southern and religious and all, no one talked about it much. It was just part of them.

My gift was that of symbols. I could see beyond what something, anything, seemed to be. No one had to teach me.

Song lyrics. Poetry. A vivid painting. A bird. A feather. A cathedral column. A bug. A guy pumping gas. It all guided me. Especially when someone died.

The last time I saw my grandmother alive, she told me love was everything.

She'd been put in the hospital again. She'd had a heart attack after her son died, and the acrimony over her land caused her heart to falter. Specifically, his wife pushed her to the floor, and the next day she had a coronary. She looked like a shroud already, enveloped in bleached sheets, her complexion pale, her skin dry as an autumn leaf in spring. Only her face was that of my grandmother.

I introduced her to my first fiancé, and she reached out for his hand. It was a struggle for her. All around us were moans and smells of antiseptic and urine, but her fresh smell lingered there, overpowering the other scents and noises. He took her hand and I placed mine over his.

Like we were making a promise, a pact.

Her body was shutting down, but her mind was still sharp, her azure eyes ablaze even though it was hard for her to speak.

“You and this young man love each other,” she said, looking from his eyes to my own.

“Yes,” I replied, noting he didn’t respond. But knowing that he did love me, in the way he could love.

“You should act on it,” she said, looking from me to him. He didn’t squirm at all but neither of us replied. His hand stayed with ours.

“Now,” she said. “As soon as possible.”

We weren’t thinking of that any time soon. I had college to finish. He’d just lost his job and was searching for another. My parents didn’t approve of a union between us and neither did his.

But I said okay, our hands still clasped.

“You love each other,” she repeated. “And love is all there is.”

We said our farewells.

A few months later she was dead.

My grandmother’s funeral was a Southern farce, but the funeral home was full of support. The eighteenth-century Latta House that housed the memorial viewings was full of ghosts, a fitting place for births, deaths, and weddings. Built of bricks hauled from Charleston, it had become a part of my history. Because of the ghost story Mama told me.

A Union Army colonel bunked there at war’s end and fell in love with the daughter of the house, a young Southern belle. They couldn’t be together. They were Americans but the timing was off. The place was off. He left. She fell into a depression and wouldn’t leave her bedroom, always watching her window in case he returned. As the story goes, she died of a broken heart, much like my grandmother had. But before she died she laid out her trousseau on her bed, guarding it like a lioness. Her family, ridden with guilt, left it there after her funeral. Her ghost came back each night to watch for her Union soldier. I could feel her there, commiserating with me from the shadows.

Because my fiancé had left too. We’d broken up in a Richmond cemetery named Hollywood, looking down at the rushing James River. Now I’d lost my grandmother, who’d gone to be with her one true love, whom she’d wed at seventeen, lost the year of my birth, and mourned for twenty-two years. She’d left us nearly homeless. I worried my parents wouldn’t even have her unheated, ramshackle house after the estate was settled.

Home and hearth weren’t the focus of the farce. It was matchmaking. I knew from the blue-haired ladies’ accents that they were from uptown, not the countryside. They gave me the card of their “eligible” young attorney nephew who had “just moved to DC.” I knew I was expected to meet him. I took his card and their calling cards and tried to make light conversation with other ladies as Death weighed on me like a stone.

That’s when Mama sunk her long fingernails into my wrist, which she did every time she meant business but suspected I wouldn’t comply with her will. “Come see my mother with me,”

she commanded.

I moved a few steps back from her, but her nails dug in farther. “I don’t want to.” I was trying to keep from crying full force.

“That is your duty as my daughter,” she said. “Your mother didn’t just die, mine did. And I only just lost my brother.” I knew the story woven between these lines. I was born so I could take care of her. I took a breath and complied.

A tear rolled down my face, only one.

“No daughter should deprive her mother of the last goodbye with her mother.” She pulled me over to the open casket.

I felt dizzy as I looked down at my grandmother. Yes, that was her dress, her brooch. Yet without her eyes open, she wasn’t anyone I knew. And without her wry smile, she was just another dead body. “She looks so beautiful.” A blue-haired lady sidled up behind us.

“Yes, she is at peace,” my mother said, digging her nails in again.

I looked at my grandmother. She was eighty. I was twenty-one. A jabbing pain rolled through my stomach. I had wanted to remember her as my magical gran, not a piece of flesh and bone. She’d left her body and, unlike the ghosts in our midst, had obviously left the building altogether. Probably bored silly with all the Southern passive-aggressive hospitality.

I willed it all to stop. I hadn’t wanted to remember my grandmother like this. Eventually my mother let go of my wrist, and I socialized and charmed the crowd. People were laughing and eating. I didn’t eat for another week. All I could see was that dead body every time I sat down to a meal. My mother seemed to be eating just fine.

When I got back to my job at National Geographic, I couldn’t concentrate. That Friday evening, nestled in my noisy Wisconsin Avenue apartment with its sirens at night and cathedral bells by day, I slept a solid twenty-four hours. It took me a couple of weeks to unpack, and I found the card in my pocket where I’d left it. They’d meant well. Plus I knew I’d hear from Mama if I didn’t follow through.

I called and invited him to lunch. I woke that day dreading it. He probably did too.

We met at the brand-new “It” political place on Connecticut Avenue, Mel Krupp’s, in the heart of the business district. It was abuzz with politicians and journalists, all come to gossip and scratch each other’s backs. The place of the power lunch. On another day I would have been intrigued, but that day I wouldn’t have known it if Larry King had been sitting beside me. I wouldn’t have known if he’d sat in my lap. I was that anxious. I don’t remember what we ate, only the ambience and lawyer lunch date’s dazzling smile. In 2023 we would have laughed out loud at the irony, but then I was in the closet as having lost my virginity, and he was in the closet. We didn’t want word to get back to South Carolina and be the predominant topic of conversation at the next funeral.

Instead we spoke about how my late grandmother had known his aunts and chuckled over their stories. Our new lives in DC. Jimmy Carter, whom I’d interned for.

My lunch date was chivalrous and paid for my lunch too, and we shook hands as we walked

into the busy-business-district-rush back to offices. He gave me a friend's card as we parted. Just like that, he passed me off to a boring IRS attorney. Those two dates with Mr. IRS worked less well than this luncheon. I at least laughed at the first "date's" jokes, and he didn't talk about the kind of light switches he'd outfit his new apartment with and how he'd install them. As I walked back to Nat Geo, a huge bird flew over my head. I looked up because I'd only felt it, not seen it. It was a great blue heron. Perched there on an awning, looking at me. If it had been a person and not a sea bird, it would have winked at me. It was the first sign my grandmother was near, but I didn't quite understand that yet.

Probably to anoint my gaping wound of grief, she started showing up to guide me in the form of a heron. When I'd see the heron, I knew something good was coming. I need only have patience. My heron guide has flown in all through my life. Seldom at first, but any time I saw a heron or a picture of a heron, I knew that the guy I was dating had real feelings for me. Or that I'd get the job offer. Or that the story I wrote would get published.

The heron stopped visiting for a while after I married my husband, the year my gran would have been eighty-five. But they started showing up again when I was trying to get pregnant a decade later.

And never stopped.

If anything, they increased. They'd show up in the weirdest way in the weirdest places. No matter what country I was in. No matter the season.

The past five years, as I've waited on my publisher to publish my novels, herons have appeared everywhere from a World War II memorial to the roof five houses down. I live in the DC suburbs, not on the Chesapeake Bay.

They appear. Something happens. Somehow I know how to navigate it.

The most recent visit took place during a trip to my family road. I call it that because it nearly is. My father's family has farmed on that road since long before I was born. One cousin still has a greenhouse garden and a tree farm. Wild boar and turkeys and deer, like my pet Bambi, still roam these fields and forests. Daddy owned land there until he had to sell it for family survival. My brother resettled there and made a family.

I was the only one not living on that road, but my uncle loved me dearly and left me some land. Land as imperfect as I am because a logging road runs through it. A deal he made right before he died when the land behind it conveyed from the newspaper pulpwood industry to a forestry guy and tree farmer.

I'd come to see if I could build on this land in my senior years, if I had enough privacy there even with a logging road four acres behind where I'd build.

One can dream.

The day before the forestry guy drove me around my property because my family was otherwise occupied, I visited my parents' gravesite in a lovely nearby cemetery. Their graves comfort me now, in a way that they didn't when I was buying the plot and burying them twenty months apart. Years since the last bill collector called me. Years since I signed the last check and

sent the last death certificate. Years since I felt guilt that I'd chosen my adopted daughter's first birthday instead of sitting bedside with my father, who hadn't wanted to be intubated. But they'd called my brother and not me, his living will executrix, because he had a local number and I didn't. Or maybe because he was a man or Southern, and I wasn't because I'd married a Yankee. Because I didn't live on that road.

I'd gone with my Yankee husband to Florida to accept an award for my first novel. I thought for sure I'd see a heron there. It was a frigid week for Florida, and I didn't see anything but a fort and a lighthouse and a bunch of readers who loved me for who I was and not some land I owned.

I left feeling a little upset I hadn't seen the heron because I knew I was entering mansplaining territory as I crossed into Georgia, then the Carolinas. I-95 was completely shut down due to a fatal accident that left children near death and fatherless after a trip to see a sports star they idolized. And I was glad to go back roads.

I was hoping to see my heron.

Still nothing. Until the cemetery visit.

I talked to my parents, though I knew they were everywhere, not buried underneath my feet. Unlike when I buried my grandmother. I could feel them there like never before because of what I'd learned about life and death since that evening in the brick city house turned funeral parlor.

My husband pretended to be walking around reading names on tombstones, but he was really giving me my time with them. My parents and I get along so well now. It was a good chat. Plus it had been eons (due to the pandemic) since my last visit, and I wanted to explain that.

A half hour later we got in our packed SUV and headed toward my family road. And there, near the cemetery exit, a heron stood, watchful, waiting.

I could have sworn it smiled at us.

"Stop!" I yelled. My wonderful husband did.

And as he pressed the brakes, the heron took a step away from us. And then was gone. Disappeared. Dematerialized. We couldn't find it even though we drove around. Walked around. Twice.

"Did you see that?" I asked in near shock.

"Yeah," Brian replied.

I'd come to visit my land on my family road because I'd been confused about what to do with my eight acres I'd inherited. Now I had my answer. I'd keep it and own it. I didn't need to import bricks from Charleston and build a mansion. I didn't need to farm it. I didn't need to live there or work there. I had followed my Yankee, found my true love of forty years, not stayed in South Carolina to pine away and die due to some silly rules about who's allowed to marry and who's not.

I'd stay a spell but I wouldn't leave my trousseau lying on the bed.

Kathryn Brown Ramsperger is a Washington, D.C.-based writer who worked for *National Geographic* and *Kiplinger*, but whose family (and its ghosts) live on South Carolina farmland. Her work, which bridges growing up Southern and the intuitive with pragmatic, objective humanitarian journalism from all across the globe, has appeared in many literary journals including *Willow Review* and *The MacGuffin*. Kathryn's third award-winning novel *A Thousand Flying Things*, (TPP June 2023) was a Faulkner-Wisdom literary finalist.